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AUTHOR Obi, Sunday O.; Obiakor, Festus E.; Algozzine, Bob
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ABSTRACT

This article examines issues in the education of culturally different students in the nation's schools. The first section examines factors underlying the future education of this population including demographic increases in numbers of culturally diverse students in the schools, historic discrimination against these groups, and under-representation or over-representation of some ethnic minorities in certain special education categories. The second section addresses multidimensional needs of culturally diverse exceptional learners such as nonbiased assessment, bilingual education, and direct intervention to reduce prejudice. The last section suggests ways to enhance empowerment possibilities for culturally diverse exceptional learners. Educators are urged to: (1) understand fundamentals of general and special education; (2) shift assessment and instructional paradigms, and (3) put practical perspectives on learned concepts. (Contains 59 references.) (DB)

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Empowering Culturally Diverse Exceptional Learners in the 21st Century:Imperatives for U.S. Educators

Sunday O. Obi, Ed.D.

Associate Professor of Education

Kentucky State University

Frankfort, Kentucky 40601

(502) 227-5919 (W)

Festus E. Obiakor, Ph.D

Professor of Psychology and Special Education

Department of Exceptional Children

University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee

Milwaukee,Wisconsin 53201

Bob Algozzine, Ph.D.

Professor of Research, Technology & Education

University of North Carolina – Charlotte

Charlotte, North Carolina 28223

(704) 547-2912 (W)

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Abstract

One of the major issues facing schools today is the problem of distinguishing genuine learning problems from students who come from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Although difficult to define, culture is an important part of the instructional process. Differences in culture can act as effective barriers for students and families in school programming. With the rapid growth of culturally diverse learners in the United States comes a corresponding increase in the number of students who are misidentified, misassessed, miscategorized, misplaced, and misinstructed. In other words, teachers often turn to special education for assistance and to some extent, place culturally diverse students in at-risk positions that magnify denigrating stereotypes. Though many educational programs contain multicultural content, they are frequently directed toward understanding other cultures without emphasizing cross-cultural strategies for teaching students and families to participate in the cultural mainstream. This article discusses (a) factors underlying the future education of culturally diverse exceptional learners, (b) multi-dimensional needs of these learners in the 21st Century, and (c) ways to enhance empowerment possibilities for these learners.

Empowering Culturally Diverse Exceptional Learners in the 21st Century

:Imperatives for U.S. Educators

Schools are faced with perpetual issues of who should be served and how and where they should be served. Clearly, traditional approaches to resolving these issues may be somewhat sophisticated but may yet lack the wisdom or the knowledge of a changing society. For instance, the issue of how best to empower culturally diverse exceptional learners has become endemic since most teachers still struggle with the infusion of multicultural education in their classroom practices. It is important that general and special educators diversify instruction so that all children can be reached. The reasons are simple. Race still matters (West, 1993); and the world is constantly changing and becoming more and more diverse (Rotatori & Obi, in press). Different people from different cultural backgrounds are sending their children to school in order to become productive citizens. The demographics of today's schools and understanding about disability are shifting at a rapid pace and educational approaches must strive to catch up with this growth.

It is increasingly apparent that general and special educators must continue to learn about themselves and their own cultures to build bridges of cultural valuing, racial understanding, and human interaction (Banks, 1999; Obiakor, 1994, 1999). Most practitioners encounter students from different cultural backgrounds, and these students' characteristics differ from their conception of what is "usual" or generally expected. For example, students may be unable to read the material that the teacher is accustomed to using, or students may speak a language or dialect foreign to him/her and sometimes use this language when he/she feels that they should use Standard English. Teaching students

who are not succeeding academically and those whose cultural backgrounds differ from that of the teacher requires changing instructional patterns and classroom procedures to facilitate academic success (Ford, Obiakor, & Patton, 1995; Grant & Sleeter, 1998). A recurring question about culturally diverse groups is whether they are disproportionately represented or identified as exceptional learners because traditional Eurocentric curriculum or strategies do not work in their favor. This question is sometimes trivialized even though overrepresentation in special education programs and underrepresentation in gifted programs have been found to be the result of reprehensible practices that reflect bias or discrimination in general and special education (Artiles & Trent, 1994). As a consequence, these practices must be corrected to address the issue of equity in school programs now and in the future.

Many educators (e.g., Grossman, 1998; Obiakor, 1994, 1999; Obiakor & Utley, 1997) have argued that culturally diverse learners have been frequently misidentified, misassessed, miscategorized, misplaced, and misinstructed by poorly prepared teachers who are rigid, and insensitive to the many differences that they bring to school programs. These practices place these students in at-risk positions and perpetuate already magnified stereotypes. To this effect, general and special educators must consistently rethink their practices, revamp their strategies, and shift their paradigms as they provide services for culturally diverse learners. These challenges are greater today because of changes in family configurations. Many students do not come from the traditional two-parent family. Some even come from group homes, foster homes, streets, or homeless shelters. Obviously, as the nation changes, so do the students, and so must schools in order to meet the needs of a widely varied student population. For example, poverty is more visible in

schools today than ever before. The question then is, Could poverty be associated with "poor" intelligence, "poor" self-concept, and "poor" ability to succeed in school.? Ironically, this question has racial, cultural, and socioeconomic implications on the education of culturally diverse exceptional learners. As a consequence, how best to empower these learners in the 21st century must become a critical focus for general and special educators. This vision is the major thrust of this article.

Factors Underlying the Future Education of Culturally Diverse Exceptional Learners

Culturally diverse populations entering public schools are rapidly growing, and with that growth comes increasing numbers of students with exceptionalities. If current growth patterns continue, it is predicted that by the year 2050, almost one half of the U.S. population will be composed of people and families from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds (Salend & Taylor, 1993; Scandia National Laboratories 1993; Walker, 1993). These dramatic changes will have profound implications for educational and social institutions that interface with families. One noteworthy implication is that human service providers will be faced with ever-increasing numbers of families holding cultural values, beliefs and preferences different from their own. Given the overrepresentation of culturally and linguistically diverse students in special education programs, it is particularly important that personnel working with individuals who have disabilities and their families be capable of delivering services in ways that are culturally responsive and relevant (Ford, 1992; Grossman, 1988; Harry, Allen, & Mclaughin, 1995). Surely, revitalization and reform are needed in the future of special education to meet the complex needs of culturally diverse exceptional learners.

Some years ago, Cummins (1989) noted that causes of culturally diverse students' academic difficulties are to be found in the ways schools have reinforced, both overly and covertly, the discrimination that certain culturally diverse groups have historically experienced in the society at large. When research results regarding the under-achievement of culturally diverse learners are examined internationally, a striking pattern emerges. The groups that currently perform very poorly at school have historically been discriminated against and regarded as inherently inferior by the dominant group. For example, in the United States, African American, Hispanic American and Native American students have all experienced subjugation by dominant groups (Ogbu, 1978). It is reasonable to argue that the educational underachievement of these groups is, in part, a function of schools that have traditionally reinforced the ambivalence and insecurity that many minority students tend to feel with regard to their own cultural identity (Cummins, 1986; Ogbu & Matute-Bianchi, 1986).

More than three decades ago, Dunn (1968) indicated that it would be impossible to reverse school failure for underachievers until educators examine and change many current classroom practices. While general and special educators acknowledge that children learn differently from each other, they continue to teach each new lesson with the same approach for everyone in the class. Ironically, students are required to control their abundant natural energy and mobility needs and sit still, memorize uninteresting facts, and publicly answer questions posed by an authoritative adult as their peers listen and watch for anticipated mistakes. Dunn concluded that when they cannot answer their teachers' questions, they feel inadequate and embarrassed and lose confidence in themselves. The consequence is that they stop liking their teachers and school, and

eventually drop out. To this effect, general and special educators must understand how to provide an education that gives equal opportunity to students regardless of gender, socioeconomic status, ethnic group, disability, or other cultural identity. In doing so, the malpractice of underrepresentation or overrepresentation of some ethnic minorities in certain special education categories will be eliminated. For example, the tendency for African American students, especially males, to be overrepresented in programs for students with emotional or behavioral disorders and underrepresented in programs for gifted and talented students must be challenged. Banks (1999), Gay (1994), Grossman (1998), and Heward (1996) confirmed that because of their racial, ethnic, social class, or other differences from the majority, many students experience discrimination or less than adequate education.

Working toward an ideal society demands a multicultural perspective (i.e., understanding and accepting one another's cultures, and seeing diversity as a strength rather than a flaw). Diversity should not be viewed as a disability. Unethical practices that occur in assessment, instruction, and socialization may be the leading etiology of problems experienced by culturally diverse students. In the future, the issue of justice and fairness must be open to questions. Traditional assessment practices have frequently violated fundamental ideals of fairness and equal opportunity regardless of ethnic origin, gender, or disability. Advocates of multicultural education are concerned with the problem of finding assessment and instructional methods that help to equalize educational opportunities and achievements for all microcultural groups. The problem regarding instruction is generated by what Minow (1985) called "the dilemma of differences." The dilemma is that ignoring or recognizing students' linguistic or cultural differences can

perpetuate and maintain inequality among ethnic or other microcultural groups. If students' differences are ignored, they will probably be given instruction that is not suited to their cultural styles or needs. They are then likely to fail to learn many socialization skills necessary for helping them develop appropriate social perceptions and interactions with others.

It seems clear that fundamental changes will have to take place in schools to address the needs of diverse population of students. As pointed out in the literature (e.g., Glasser, 1986; Goodlad, 1983; National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983), assessment, instruction, behavior management, and curricular models are changing, although less rapidly than many educators would prefer, given the changing demographics and public criticism of education. Even with these gloomy pictures, the future of the education of culturally diverse exceptional learners appears bright. It appears that even in a small measure, general and special educators are slowly advancing past the knowledge phase. Their major problems appear to be in the application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation of what they have to do to reach all students in the future.

Multidimensional Needs of Culturally Diverse Exceptional Learners in the 21st Century

A useful process for forecasting directions for the future in the special education of culturally diverse learners is by reviewing the various concerns of advocates who are calling for changes in the ways services are provided. The call for a change came in earnest more than a decade ago with inclusive education advocates (e.g., Will, 1986) urging general educators to become more responsible for the education of students who have special needs in school, including those who are bilingual and economically

disadvantaged. Even though full inclusion has been endorsed by only parents and professionals, it has stimulated further debates. Schools should be about enhancing the quality of life of people and about creating better communities while trying to maintain their traditional obligations. Unfortunately, general and special educators seem to be poorly prepared to handle the changing demography. For instance, Goals 2000 calls for the education of "all students," including those with exceptionalities (U.S. Department of Education, 1995), however, it is unlikely that the needs of all "normal" and exceptional learners will be met by the turn of the century.

Common issues of nonbiased assessment, second-language acquisition, and bilingual education continue to be critical in understanding the needs of culturally diverse students. To deal with these critical issues, there must be sensitivity to linguistic and cultural differences, early intervention, transdisciplinary teaming, and family involvement. When culturally diverse students are at risk or have disabilities, their educational needs become much more complex. A spirit of advocacy must be awakened within special education – and throughout the educational process – to adequately prepare the U.S. for the surge of culturally diverse learners entering classrooms and schools every year. As cited by Fradd and Correa (1989), advocacy effort can serve to assist diverse exceptional learners.

As the profession prepares to move into the 21st century, educational research describing effective assessment and instruction is needed. Specialized instruction cannot be carried out effectively without the involvement of professionals trained to seek common perspectives and to provide comprehensive services (Fradd & Bermudez, 1989). With the call for full inclusion, the need to develop efficient and cost-effective strategies

increases. Collaborative teaming can be both cost effective and appropriate. The development of cooperative, transdisciplinary approaches will continue to be essential. The policy of a closed network of school professionals will no longer adequately serve the population of culturally diverse students and their families in the 21st century. A collaborative approach is important for communication among professionals working within the new arena. Supportive attitudes must prevail for success in transdiciplinary teaming (Correa, 1989; Yates, 1988).

It is imperative that general and special educators practice respect for culturally different behaviors. Instead of viewing a behavior as right or wrong, it should be best judged by how well it is suited to the demands of the educational environment. To better deal with behavior changes, general and special educators need to develop an awareness of how cultural background affects the way people behave (McIntyre, 1992). In the future, teacher training institutions must assume the larger share of the burden of imparting cultural information. Future teachers must study this information and be guided in its use in practica settings. Because teacher educators can impart information regarding cultural characteristics, instructional modifications, and culturally sensitive behavior management practices, they must first educate themselves in this area (Armstrong, 1991; McIntyre, 1992; Obiakor, 1994, 1999). As Armstrong pointed out, schools can promote cultural understanding in a number of ways ranging from conducting inservice sessions with national level consultants or local civic leaders of particular cultures, to hiring individuals from minority groups capable of communicating information across cultures. In the same measure, school districts must consider projects that focus on recruiting and retaining culturally diverse students and personnel. They

must be sensitive to educational practices and hiring procedures to ensure that these procedures address the unique needs of culturally diverse students with disabilities as part of their individualized education plans.

In the 21st century, facts alone will not be enough to reduce prejudice toward another group. As a result, general and special educators will need to change attitudes by asking students to openly discuss how they feel toward another group. In addition, they need to help all children feel positive about themselves so that they will feel positive toward those who are different from them. Social contacts among members of different groups may reduce prejudice, whereas isolation of cultural diverse students may foster prejudice toward them. Again, direct contacts between groups will be better in school district programs. The work of Glock, Wuthnow, Pilievin, and Spencer (1975) showed that "cognitive sophistication" is important in reducing negative attitudes toward other groups. This sophistication requires that children understand the mental process of stereotyping and labeling as well as the other culture's life experience and history. In the 21st century, it will be necessary for classrooms, schools, and communities to plan activities that expose worldviews. Additionally, Freedman, Gotti, and Holtz (1981) encouraged teaching students some examples of "counter stereotypic" behaviors by members of ethnic groups. To increase cognitive structures of students, they must be exposed to positive contributions of other cultures. For a brighter future, all educational systems must incorporate cultural and linguistic diversities and how these diversities are related to each other.

Ways to Enhance Empowerment Possibilities

for Culturally Diverse Exceptional Learners

To enhance empowerment possibilities for all learners, especially those who come from different racial, cultural, linguistic and socioeconomic backgrounds, multicultural education must be put into proper perspectives. Today, the impact of multicultural education is felt in general and special education programs; and in the future, the impact will be felt even more. It is reasonable to argue that multicultural education teaches people to experiment and experience, the very ingredients of education. Dewey (1958), in his classical work, presented a concept of education that has the ability to uplift humanity. Interestingly, this concept of education has been corroborated by many multicultural scholars and educators. As Dewey emphasized:

> Education must have the tendency, if it is education, to form attitudes. The tendency to form attitudes which will express themselves in intelligent social action is something very different from indoctrination . . . There is an intermediary between aimless education and the education of inculcation and indoctrination. The alternative is the kind of education that connects the materials and methods by which knowledge is acquired with a sense of how things are done; not by impregnating the individual with some final philosophy, whether it comes from Karl Marx or from Mussolini or Hitler or anybody else, but by enabling him[her] to so understand existing conditions that an attitude of intelligent action will follow from social understanding. (p. 56)

To empower culturally diverse learners, especially those with exceptionalities, educators must (a) understand fundamentals of general and special education, (b) shift assessment and instructional paradigms, and (c) put practical perspectives on learned concepts.

Understanding Fundamentals of General and Special Education

The aims of multicultural education are very similar to those of general and special education. Whether students are in general or special education programs, teachers must (a) stimulate them intellectually by presenting them with novel ideas, (b) assist them in maximizing their full potential by understanding their strengths and weaknesses, (c) prepare them for the future by focusing on their positive energies, (d) create nurturing environments by empowering them, (e) collaborate and consult with their parents by regarding them as equal partners, and (f) provide support mechanisms for growth and development by becoming problem solvers. The idea must not be to create or give labels and hope that students match their labels (Debruyn 1984).

For multicultural learners with exceptionalities to be empowered, general and special educators must understand their multidimensional classroom, school, and community problems. These learners confront expectations that are counterproductive to their sacred existence as human-beings (Banks, 1999; Obiakor, 1994; Siccone, 1995). They are frequently at risk of (a) misidentification, (b) discriminatory referral and assessment, (c) undue processes, (d) disempowerment, (e) misinstruction, and (f) improper inclusion/exclusion in educational programming (Ford et al., 1995; Grossman, 1998; Obiakor & Schwenn, 1995, 1996; Obiakor & Utley, 1997; Utley & Obiakor, 1997; Winzer & Mazurek, 1998). As Winzer and Mazurek indicated:

> Special education can no longer be concerned solely with the nature of a disabling condition and appropriate intervention strategies tailored for a particular disability. With the composition of the school-aged population shifting to encompass more students from culturally diverse backgrounds, bilingual homes, and economically disadvantaged families, the need for special services in the schools increases, and special educators must consider a broader range of characteristics that specifically include (but are certainly not restricted to) cultural and linguistic difference. Today and in the future, schools must develop programs, teaching methods, and resources to teach a diverse body and improve special education service delivery for exceptional learners from a wide variety of cultural and linguistic backgrounds. (p. 1)

Shifting Assessment and Instructional Paradigms

As it appears, multidimensional problems call for multidimensional solutions that empower. There must be shifts in power and paradigms on how students are identified, assessed, placed, and instructed. It is dangerous to prejudge students' capabilities, strengths and weaknesses. Gardner (1993) stated that general and special educators must "recognize and nurture all of the varied human intelligences, and all of the combinations of intelligences" (p. 12). They must begin early to create multicultural environments that build multidimensional self-concepts of students (Obiakor, 1994,1999; Siccone, 1995). For example, Siccone suggested that the teacher asks himself/herself the following instructional questions:

- Am I tailoring my curriculum so that it is relevant to my students – their interests and ambitions as well as their cultural identity?
- Am I aware of my students' various learning styles, and do my teaching strategies reflect this awareness?
- Are the books and other materials I use reflective of diversity – ethnicity, culture, race, class, gender, age, "handicapping" conditions, and so forth?
- Are the images on the walls, bulletin board, and so forth also reflective of diversity? (p. 187)

To shift paradigms and improve culturally diverse learners, general and special educators must avoid illusory conclusions about those who look, learn, talk, and behave differently. They must authenticate their assessments by documenting students' behaviors in a variety of learning and teaching situations. Such documentations must (a) be culturally sensitive (Hilliard, 1995; Midgette, 1995); (b) include nontraditional assessment methods such as work samples, student interviews, and student journals (Armstrong, 1994; Erickson, 1992; Karr & Wright, 1995; Mehring, 1996); and (c) be related to nonprejudicial instructions (Banks, 1999; Grossman 1998; Obiakor, 1994, 1998, 1999).

Putting Practical Perspectives on Learned Concepts

General and special educators must practice what they preach. They must use divergent techniques to teach and improve culturally diverse learners with exceptionalities. To look for the "magic pill" that can cure educational problems of culturally diverse learners is not realistic. Educators must be trained to value individual

and cultural differences (Ford et al., 1995; Obiakor, 1994, 1997; Obiakor & Algozzine, 1995; Obiakor & Utley, 1997); and they must be aware of emotional first-aids needed to address crises confronting their students (Obiakor, Campbell-Whatley, Schwenn, & Dooley, 1998; Obiakor, Mehring, & Schwenn 1997). In these regards, pre-service and in-service programs can be very beneficial. It is non-productive to spend time bemoaning the existence of multicultural education as a new paradigm – this new paradigm can be taught, learned, and put into practical perspectives. In the words of Price (1991):

> I wonder, frankly, how we can bemoan the phenomena of tribalization and multiculturalism in our society if we are doing so little to eliminate the economic and educational disparities which fuel them. The appropriate antidote for increased separatism is a culture of inclusiveness which would infuse every facet of our society. To my mind, the blame for balkanization rests more with those who have the power to include but won't, and less with those on the outside who are barred entry. (p. 8)

To this end, efforts must be made to recruit, retain, graduate and place culturally diverse students in teacher preparation programs (Obiakor & Utley, 1997; Ward, 1996). Traditional models have failed to produce practitioners who understand the possible interactions between exceptionalities and cultural diversities. According to Obiakor and Utley, "it is the professional responsibility of teacher educators to help prospective teachers expand their knowledge, beliefs, and attitudes toward people who differ from them" (p. 105).

It is common knowledge that poorly prepared teachers teach poorly. Even when people know what they have been taught, they sometimes find it difficult to apply them.

When culturally diverse students are taught by teachers who do not understand their cultures, symbols, or values, the whole concept of empowerment fails. Additionally, when instructions lack practical pedagogical power and appear divorced from students' realities, students suffer. As a consequence, general and special educators must, (a) know who they are and who their students are, (b) learn the facts when they are in doubt, (c) change their thinking, (d) use resource persons (e.g., parents, guardians, and community members), (e) build self-concepts, (f) teach with multidimensional techniques, (g) make the right choices, and (h) continue to learn (see Obiakor, 1994, 1999).

Conclusion

In this article, we have addressed the issue of empowerment for culturally diverse exceptional learners in the 21st century. Embedded in our discussion are important directions for responding to challenges facing the education of these learners. We feel that to enhance empowerment possibilities for culturally diverse exceptional learners, educators, families, and support personnel must need additional training and opportunities to work as members of collaborative teams. To implement changes in practices, colleges and universities must alter their programs to better prepare general and special educators to maximize learning opportunities for their students.

We are convinced, more than before, that culturally diverse learners need to be taught by well- prepared teachers who are sensitive to their needs and those who possess a repertoire of instructional techniques, as well as the ability to infuse technology in teaching principles. We believe educators and administrators have the responsibility to take advantage of multicultural possibilities to empower their students and colleagues. If teachers and administrators truly believe positive interactions between different groups

can lead to a better world for everyone, then they must employ techniques available to them for fostering such interactions on regular bases. It is imperative that we promote a world where "cultural diversity" will lose its negative connotation and the word "different" is seen as an exciting phenomenon. At the core, we must realize that we are all humans with different strengths and weaknesses. Finally, we must value and utilize these strengths and weaknesses in ways that reduce discriminatory assessments, negative labels, inappropriate placements, and illusory conclusions.

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